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## CAN THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION BE KINDLY?

Precedent favors a negative answer. The more sacred the subject of discussion, the more bitterness seems to spring in the hearts of the disputants. Yet however unfortunate, such a result is natural. Indifferentism alone leaves men indifferent. When you believe something you are sure to defend your convictions, and the more strongly you believe, the more vigorous will be your defense.

It would be a misfortune if discussion were to cease. We grow intelligent by having other people criticize our opinions. We even venture to hope that other people grow intelligent by our criticism of theirs.

But discussion is liable to lead to irritation. It is difficult to maintain spiritual poise when submitting to intellectual correction. We are apt to grow impatient as we fail to make converts, and impatience is not the mother of kindness. It is sometimes relieved by calling names. He is a rare disputant whose temper is not heated by opposing arguments.

There is no one of us who can cast stones at another in this regard. We all need to set a watch before our lips. Especially just now when the whole world is trying to recover from years of bloody fighting is the quarrelsome spirit likely to be contagious.

The real preventive of unkindliness in theological discussion is loyalty to the Christianity we discuss. In fact it is difficult not to feel that the value of a man's theology varies inversely with its power to stimulate enmity. Because Jesus Christ felt justified in using strong language with the Pharisees, theological conviction does not need to be vituperative. If we really believe that God is a loving Father, and that the supreme perfection we can attain

is Godlike love, we should so order our theological discussion as not to imperil that perfection. We cannot be neutral in our beliefs. We can be kindly in our differences.

Perhaps the basal need is that we realize that formulas are all broken rays of truth. None of us knows all that there is to be known. At our best we can succeed only in setting forth that which we believe. The total reality lies far beyond our description and definition. The whole of a mountain can never be seen from a single valley.

We can often get together by talking together. Once we are sure of the sincerity of each other's Christian purposes, we can afford to be patient in adjusting our intellectual approaches to a description of those purposes. The day certainly cannot be far distant when men of similar aims and similar consecration to the same Lord will cease to let dictionaries become weapons of disunion. If we cannot organize infallible definitions we are abundantly able to recognize and co-operate with similar purposes.

All the radii of a circle meet at the center. If we place Jesus Christ at the center of the theological circle, we may each stand on a different radius. To get together we do not need to pull our neighbors over to our own radius. All we need to do is to walk toward the center. The nearer we get to him, the nearer we get to each other.

But he is not a formula but a person, and approach to him is conditioned by the possession of his own attitude of love. One does not need to be wise to be Christlike, but one does need to be kindly even in theological discussions.